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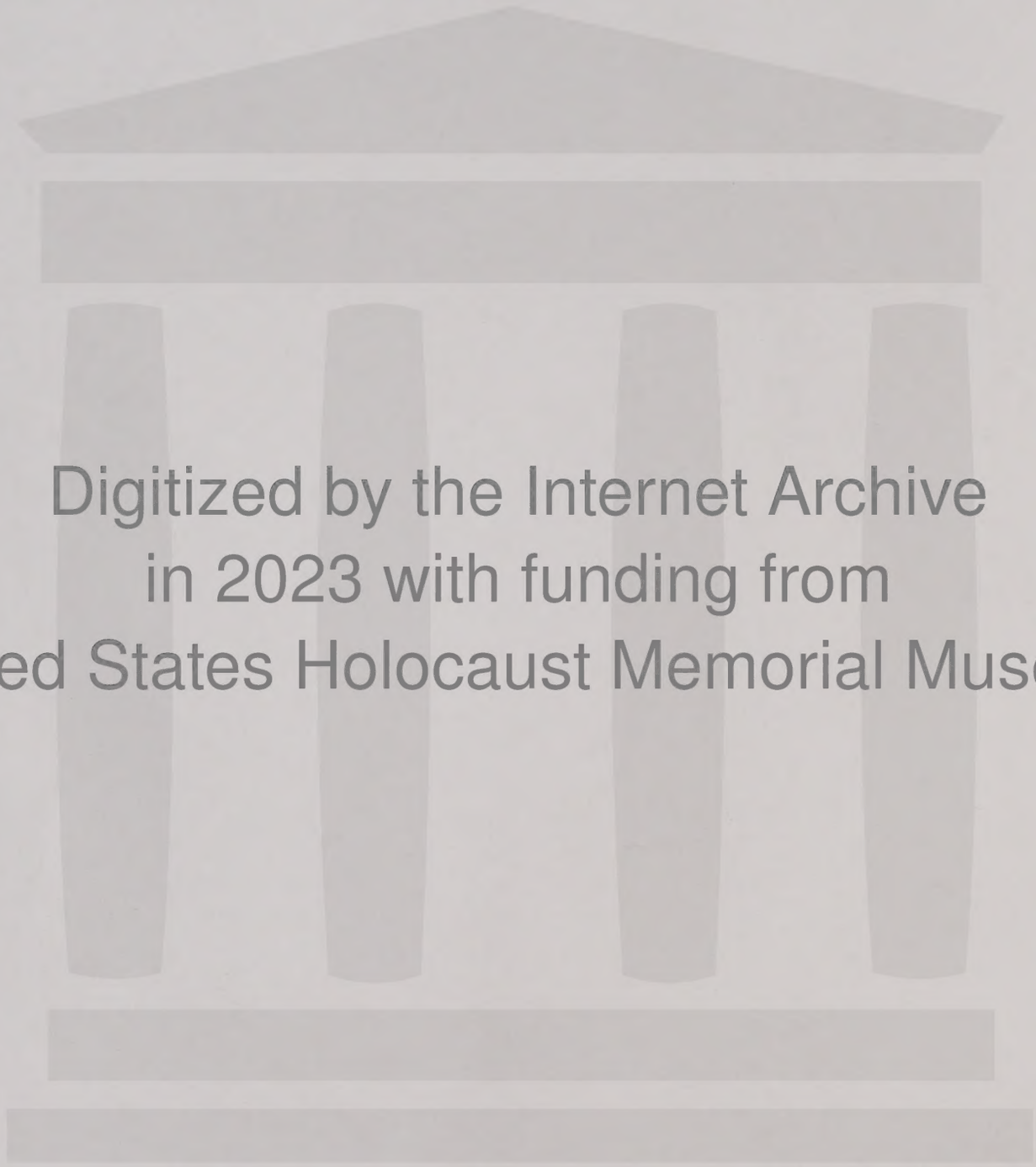

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Kristallnacht

It was a time of great stress and anxiety for my family, my people. A time of closeness and warmth for me. A limited time, a few months.

My parents and I lived in Prague, but my mother's home town was Saaz, now Zatec, which lay in the Sudetenland, the German speaking part of Czechoslovakia. My grandparents, and Aunt Herta and Uncle Ernst lived there until September, 1938. Then the Nazis occupied the area, and they evacuated to Prague.

I was seven years old, and knew little of the world's affairs. For me, it was a wonderful time with my favourite relatives, because I could spend much more time with them than previously, help to bake and cook, play games with them and hear lots of stories I didn't hear at home. I was their only grandchild and niece, totally adored, petted, spoiled.

My grandfather had been the cantor of the Saaz Synagogue. He had chanted the prayers and services there since the turn of the century. I loved to watch him from the high, balcony where the women sat. This section had a wood railing, which felt soft and slippery in my hands as I moved from one end to the other. The Temple was a high, stone building with round stained glass windows near the ceiling, and a big organ, which filled the building with wonderful music.

Opa stood in front of the Ark. It was made of dark, much polished wood, had a crimson curtain for front cover. High above hung the Eternal Light in it's tangerine glass vessel. Inside leaned the *Torahs,* biblical scrolls, dressed in velvet of midnight blue, magenta or purple, all embroidered in gold and silver thread with shiny bells and breastplates on the outside.

Opa seemed to sing especially to me, even as he was leading the congregation. I thought his the most melodious voice in the whole world. I

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really belonged in that Temple with all those people. I participated in services as much as a small child could. I often hummed or sang along with him. In the evenings he told me the stories of biblical figures like Queen Esther or Ruth and Naomi.

The Sabbath and holidays, celebrated around Oma's beautifully set table, and weighed down with home-made delicacies, were always very special and attuned to my understanding. I felt deeply involved and very religious. It was there, in that warm and safe atmosphere that my identity as a Jew was established. It was pervasive and existed without question. My parents were not religious, so we did not attend services or celebrate Schabbes in Prague.

Oma and Opa's house in Saaz, where we had always spent my favourite holidays was semi-detached from the Temple. The entrance to their home was through a very dark passage between the two buildings. Their front door opened into the kitchen where the air was saturated with the aromas of kosher dill pickles marinating in a barrel, bread baking in the oven of the coal burning stove, strudel cooling on Oma's big wooden table. In Prague they lived in a small more modern apartment, and Oma didn't feel like cooking much in her tiny kitchen.

After their evacuation, Opa traveled back to his home every Friday afternoon to chant the Sabbath services as usual, and then returned to Prague on the following evening. Until that terrible night of November 9, 1938.

That day, the rest of our family were gathered around my grandmother's table in Prague enjoying our Sabbath dinner as usual. Everyone was grateful that we could still follow this Friday evening ritual together. The talk was relatively serious, sometimes lightened by laughter when my father or Uncle Ernst interjected humour or told jokes.

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We were enjoying our dessert of crunchy, juicy apple strudel with whipped cream on top, when the door burst open and Opa, ashen faced and trembling, collapsed into the closest chair.

"Was ist Dir den? Wieso bist Du schon zurück? Was ist passiert? -- What's the matter? How come you're back? What happened? -- We all surrounded Opa. He reached for his *Tallis,* and yarmulke, and sobbed convulsively for several minutes.

"Ach, ach, dass so etwas passieren kann! Schrecklich, schrecklich!" - Oh, that something like this could happen! Terrible, terrible. - he began. The women cried and I crept to his knee, brushed my face on his rough, woolly trousers, searched for his hand, put it on my head, as for a blessing and held onto the fringe of his prayer shawl.

"Also last den Papa schon erzählen." -- Let Papa tell already.-- Oma was leaning over her husband, rubbing his back and hugging him. My father tried to hold us at some distance to make room for Opa to breathe. Slowly, he started to tell his story.

"I arrived in Saaz, ran up the old, stone stairs of the narrow street to the Temple. Smoke assailed my nostrils. I was gasping for breath. When I got to the top, I saw that the Temple was ablaze, and a huge crowd had gathered. Our former neighbors and friends screamed anti-Semitic slogans, hoisted swastikas, hurled stones and kicked innocents they considered guilty of crimes none of them had committed.

"I saw one old man on the ground, they hit and kicked him. I wasn't sure who he was. He was all bloody. It might even have been the Rabbi. I couldn't get near to help. The horror of it all. Shame! Shame! The windows of the Temple and the house were broken, and everything inside burnt. Also our sacred Torahs. Everything, Everything.

"I was afraid for my life, so I raced back down to the station, and caught the Prague train. On the return trip, I found a newspaper, which reported that burning and looting of Jewish homes and businesses had been ordered throughout the occupied lands in revenge for the murder of an S.S.

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captain. I couldn't believe it. Was there really a murder? Was it perpetrated by one of our people? On what provocation?"

We were all crying, even my father and uncles. I'm not sure I understood it all, but the tears of the men, whom I had never seen cry before, made me understand how serious and dreadful it all was. I crept closer to Opa. Held on tighter.

The discussion which followed Opa's story, lasted several hours. Every angle was examined. When would the Nazis invade Prague? How would we escape? Where would we go? I fell asleep in Oma's arms. It was the last time any of us ever returned to the family home.

This nightwas later labeled *Kristallnacht* - crystal night, or night of broken glass.

During the next months, wooden crates and large woven baskets arrived in our apartment and were packed, ready to be shipped to wherever we might be able to go. The family's nerves were raw, the anxiety palpable. I went to school as usual and visited my beloved grandparents often. But they didn't smile or tease me as much as they had. Their eyes lost their twinkle, and they often looked at me, as if I weren't there. I would jump into their arms for a hug and kiss to let them know, " I'm really here". Then, for a little while the smile would return, and they held me so tight, I thought I would burst. Almost like making me part of themselves.

I think they knew even then, that all their family would leave, but that they could not. They had never traveled abroad, so had no passports. Getting exit visas without them was virtually impossible. They knew that these were needed for any attempted flight. I tried to cheer them up. I told funny stories, or asked riddles. They often asked me to repeat, then gave a tiny smile. Even making funny faces was ignored, as if they didn't see me. I didn't like the feeling of sadness, and would not give up trying to make them happy. Nothing worked. They were distanced by worries.